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Our University: Its Changing Face

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Our University: Its Changing Face

First in a series on who our students are, and how they perform.

The precariousness of balancing opportunity, access and excellence will be addressed in the coming weeks as the face of the university intersects the faces of students.

An opportunity is a conjunction of circumstances by which one may improve his condition of life or his equipment for life.

William De Witt Hyde, *Vocations*

A long term look at high school students, as they begin and complete college or enter the workforce, is discussed in The 1988 National Education Longitudinal Study, (NELS:1998) which tracked students who started high school in 1988, graduated in 1992, and followed them until the turn of the century. The 1988: NELS Study is revealing regarding those students who are first in family (FIF) to attend college; these young men and women are tilling new soil.

I visited a campus over a decade ago where the president showed me statistics of the families whose off-spring attended a historically black college. The average family income of new freshmen was short of \$25,000 per year. Poor people, according to the president. After graduation, these same students attained average starting salaries at graduation that exceeded their parents' family income by over 50%. Successful people, according to the president.

A good university changes individual and family trajectory.

To look ahead another generation, the students who were FIF might produce children who will be second generation college goers. There is a marked difference in the propensity of success for those students, with a long term social impact.

FIF students have different faces on the university campus and have a number of particular characteristics. Relevant universities will address these students or lose social and economic pertinence. Nothing new here: This has always been the case in U.S. higher education. We are in a "game-changing" business.

Nationally, about 40% of the new freshmen are FIF to attend college. This varies with the type of institution, whether it is public or private, and takes into account that prestigious and selective privates have more inter-generational college goers.

A friend of mine, a dean at a prestigious private school, and I, compared graduation and retention rates recently. He boasted about how well his institution did in graduating people in four years. He was correct, but the average entering SAT and ACT scores in his school were at the 95th percentile. I suggested to him, in partial jest, that all he

needed to do was get out of the way. My pride increased watching the accomplishments and success of our more average students' ability, as measured by standardized tests.

Regional universities and community colleges have much higher numbers of students who are FIF. In one study, 53% of the FIF students were Asian. More and more FIF students are from minority families. Surprisingly, of all the first generation students, over half came from families who had middle or upper middle socio-economic status.

The challenge for the university is real: Accommodate the special characteristics that FIF students bring to the campus, or lose effectiveness.

According to the NELS Study, these FIF students work for pay more than the average students and that means that they volunteer or participate in other personal growth opportunity less. A job clearly offers growth potential too, but you need not pay tuition for that.

In addition, they do not feel well prepared academically. In many cases they have reasonable high school Grade Point Averages, but college performance is sub-par, and more pointedly, they know they are not well prepared in comparison to their classmates. As a group, they do significantly more remedial work in mathematics and science. These features of that group of students have been reinforced by numerous studies.

Lastly, FIF students' propensity to come back for the sophomore year and eventually to complete a degree in six years or less is below the national average.

Finding ways to increase the probability of student success is a win-win outcome.

Taking students in, and taking their money without academic success, will, in the end, take us to the cleaners.